

The WHS project and you

By **Katherine L. Babson, Jr.**/Guest Commentary

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The Wellesley High School Building Project is significant to each and every resident of the town of Wellesley, and not just those who currently or will have children in the public school system.

The majority of residents in Wellesley do not have children who will be educated in the new or renovated Wellesley High School. But the WHS Project is more than a school building project: it is the development of a major, long-term town asset. It is the largest building project Wellesley has undertaken since the initial construction of the high school almost 70 years ago, and it will affect every one of us for many years, in different ways:

1. It is the cornerstone of our public education system, and therefore enables the achievement and reputation of excellence to continue for the next 50 years;
2. The public building will be a landmark of town character and civic pride;
3. Property values are indirectly influenced by the investment in the public system and the development of critical town assets;
4. Residents bear the cost through property taxes.

THE IMPERATIVE

Deteriorating facility—aging systems approaching the end of useful life, changes in building codes and accessibility requirements, high repair and maintenance needs

Capacity constraints— current enrollment at building capacity; enrollment will grow by at least 25% over the next 10 years

Educational evolution/revolution—individualized instruction, special education, technology

THE OPPORTUNITY

A ***High School*** to meet the educational needs today and for the next 50 years

A ***High School*** with the flexibility to meet changing needs, both in curriculum and in student capacity

A ***Town Asset*** which is rationally designed and cost-effective

A ***Town Building*** which is a source of community use and pride

A ***Town Project*** which achieves community support and collaboration

Because each of you will be impacted by this project, the School Building Committee members are committed to reaching out to as many residents as possible during the development process. Processes work best when people are involved and encouraged to communicate. Questions must be asked, issues raised and compromises made. The project will not be successful without the input, understanding and accord of our citizens along the way.

We request that you join us as we explore options and navigate choices. The project cannot meet everyone's preferences and expectations, as we will hear competing opinions, values, concerns and interests. However, we will strive for the best balance without compromising the primary objectives.

Here is where we are

With the approval of 2006 Town Meeting, the School Committee conducted an intensive, broad-based programming study to determine the space requirements to meet the needs of today and to provide the flexibility to meet the needs for the next 50 years. The architects translated the space requirements into a number of "fit tests" to see how the requirements can literally fit on the already tight site. We have been exploring the implications of these "fit-tests" on the use of the current building and existing site, including the adjacent Selectman's Parcel; on timing and disruption to students, faculty and neighbors; on costs; on potential for reimbursement; and on meeting the interests of constituent groups. We have just completed a round of public meetings to gather input on these project components. Throughout our approach, we are striving to mold our processes to comply with the new Massachusetts School Building Authority regulations to maximize possible funding assistance from the state.

Here is what will be next

Based on the input we receive from residents and constituents and potentially more information from the MSBA, the SBC and Permanent Building Committee will work with the architects over the summer to wrestle with the fit tests and their implications. They will be making refinements to some, studying others and reviewing cost estimates of all with the goal of identifying those conceptual plans that best balance the various project components. The SBC will provide a substantive status report for Town Meeting in the fall.

In order to effectively communicate over the course of the project, the SBC will employ as many methods and points of access as possible — *brief* for those who like executive summaries and *in-depth* for those who like to dig. However, communication needs to be two-way to be effective. We hope to hear your views, concerns and approvals using e-mail, regular mail and public meetings. We will provide updates and notices by newspaper, newsletters, town website, cable TV, public forums and e-mail where possible.

Over the next several months, the SBC will submit to the Townsman a series of informational articles covering major questions that been raised during the process to

date. The first of these articles will address “What are the educational principles and priorities being applied to architectural choices?”

For current information on the high school building project, including presentations and reports available for download, as well as SBC meetings schedule, please go to our Web site at www.wellesleyma.gov. There is a *direct link* to the *School Building Committee* at the bottom of the home page under Useful Information. You can e-mail us at sbc@wellesleyma.gov.

Katherine Babson is chairman of the School Building Committee and chairman of the Board of Selectmen.